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THE HISTORICAL ARCHEOLOGIST AND HISTORIC SITE DEVELOPMENT

by Stanley South

I am glad to have the opportunity of addressing historic site administrators on historic site research, development, and preservation as seen by a historical archeologist. The historical archeologist usually works closely with the site administrator in achieving mutual goals. These usually relate to (1) the restoration of standing structures, (2) the location of hidden features once forming an important part of a historic complex, (3) the recovery of details of past life styles such as artifacts, useful in interpreting past cultures, and (4) relating the story learned through documents and archeology to the public through museum exhibits and on-site explanatory exhibits, such as the replacing of palisades in their original ditches, opening fortification ditches, and replacing the accompanying parapets in their original location. Such interpretations have been carried out at Jamestown, Virginia; Brunswick Town, North Carolina; Fort Frederica, Georgia; Bethabara, North Carolina; Fort Raleigh, North Carolina; and, most recently, at the site of the 1670 settlement of Charles Towne, South Carolina.

Such archeologically documented preservation and development of historic sites is quite a different animal from the tourist attractions in the form of forts, log cabins, and fake rebuilt towns that are springing up on all sides as money-making ventures. The responsibility of historic site administrators and archeologists lies in insuring that interpretations and explanatory exhibits on competently researched, examined, and developed historic sites are of the highest standards available in our time. The fifth, and most important goal to the archeologist from a professional point of view, is the recovery of data of value in comparative studies and the addition to our accumulation of basic knowledge which can have a feed-back into succeeding excavations.

Returning to the fourth goal of competently researched and developed historic sites, it would seem to be obvious that administrators should always put the integrity of the historic site and the responsibility to history foremost in any decision, and not expedience and financial convenience. However, it is often on this very point that the historical archeologist runs afoul of the goals of the historic site administrator. For instance, when an archeologist learns that a curator of a well-known museum is conducting "house cleaning," has piled large quantities of Indian artifacts in a high pile on the museum floor, breaking whole Indian pots in the process, and has offered them to collectors and others for the taking, the archeologist becomes somewhat disturbed, to say the least, at this curatorial procedure. When he learns that Indian pots taken from this grab bag of artifacts by responsible people have been found to be among the most important dated Cherokee vessels from the nineteenth century in existence, vessels providing invaluable data to the understanding of Cherokee ceramic development in the late period, he can only look on such curatorial practices as being grossly incompetent. There are times, therefore, such as in this instance, when the archeologist feels that his goals are definitely not related to those of the curator. In general, however, there is a seeking to achieve mutual goals relating to

historic site development.

My discussion here is not oriented, however, to the preservation of the artifacts which result from the work of the archeologist on historic sites, although to many curators and administrators this is the only reason they can see for having historical archeology done; rather, it is designed to illustrate the value of historical archeology in research and development of architectural data present on almost all historic sites. The point I hope to make is that the historic site administrator and archeologist have a responsibility to the wealth of data stored as a treasure beneath the soil of every historic site. I hope to make clear the necessity for doing historical archeology on any site being developed so that parking lots, museums, pump houses, septic tanks, roads, and pavilion structures designed to interpret the site will not be carelessly placed, resulting in the destruction of important data waiting to be revealed by means of the archeologist's trowel.

Throughout America, historical societies which have never had more than a few hundred dollars in their treasury, are finding that grants from foundation and federal agencies have resulted in their becoming involved in a business where hundreds of thousands of dollars are available. Some of these restoration-sponsoring groups have done an outstanding job of research and development with their funds in bringing to reality their dream of creating a bridge for understanding between the past and the present.

Other groups often begin spending the funds they have suddenly acquired in a rapid manner, sometimes without proper regard for historical and archeological research to insure the authenticity of the restorations they are undertaking.

Through the Institute of Archeology and Anthropology at the University of South Carolina, we are providing needed archeological assistance to local societies and commissions, and, in this capacity, we have encountered examples of projects where entire seventeenth century villages have been on the drawing board and in the model-making stage, with a million dollars reserved for the project, before any thorough research or archeological work was undertaken. Needless to say, we had quite a struggle in convincing the supporters of the "Jamestown Village" type interpretation that there was a need to keep such unauthenticated constructions off the original village site until proper study had been undertaken, and then we could support it only if documents and archeology had abundantly demonstrated that a valid construction of this type could be competently undertaken.

Another example illustrating how not to go about planning a restoration project was seen when the interpretive museum for an archeological site was proposed to be constructed directly on top of a documented plantation house, the ruins of which were clearly visible. Again we were placed in the role of trying to protect the historical sanctity of an archeological site from the developers who were determined to destroy a relic of the past, ironically, in the name of "preservation of our heritage." The fact that a million dollars was planned for the construction of the museum seemed to be sufficient cause to destroy a pile of brick and stone from an old ruin. Fortunately, we were able to convince the sponsors to move the museum site and thus save the ruin.

The site to which the museum was planned to be moved had no history of early occupation by man. At the meeting at which the archeologist was asked to explore the new site for possible ruins someone made the remark that it might be risky to allow the digging to take place on the new pavilion site because the archeologist might find an Indian pavilion on the site and ask that the museum be moved again. Everyone, including the archeologist, had a laugh over this suggestion. However, the archeological work did reveal an Indian pavilion or ceremonial center two hundred feet square, with an adjoining one-hundred-foot compound with a circular bastion attached. No such ceremonial center with a temple ruin, ceremonial sheds, and circular bastion tower had ever been discovered before, and the archeologists set about trying to save the site by attempting to point out the unique significance of the discovery. If the pavilion construction could be moved over only two hundred feet, the Indian structure could be saved and new posts placed in the original postholes would make a most impressive explanatory exhibit for public enjoyment and education. However, in spite of a great outcry from the public, including news coverage on the Huntley-Brinkley Report, this historic Indian structure was destroyed, ironically by a structure designed ostensibly to interpret the history of the site.

Another restoration group, dealing with a Revolutionary War site on which ruins of nine military fortification features and an entire palisaded town are located, felt it necessary to use their restoration funds to buy log cabins, dismantle them, and reassemble them on the historic site, using exposed California redwood in the process. Another commission, involved with a site on which is located a standing Revolutionary War fortification and six other fortifications from the French and Indian War period and the Revolutionary War, is also planning on hauling log cabins to the site, a site already incredibly blessed with historic archeological treasure. This is being done, it is said, in order to provide the public with something of interest to look at. My question is, how many log cabins can the public absorb on historic sites before they begin rejecting as bogus pseudo-history all such attempts to interpret the past? Will we not reach the saturation point with such efforts? Is not the public now more sophisticated than to require a log cabin on every historic site it visits? We are all working toward a dream of competently researched historic sites through archives and archeology, with the resulting authentic restorations and reconstructions. The evaluation as to whether our efforts will have a permanent educational and beneficial result depends on whether, in bringing our dream to reality, we maintain a high standard of values anchored in thorough research and then translated into competent restorations and on-site explanatory exhibits.

Somewhere between our visionary projection into the future, and the historic sites and structures we see today, the dream meets the reality. Our responsibility to the future lies in first having a dream worthy of our striving and in reaching for its conversion to reality through the most competent means at our disposal. We must take care not to spoil the dream in eagerness to bring its fuzzy edges too quickly into the sharp focus of reality. To do so is to warp our understanding of history through the creation of distorted images that do a disservice to the past as well as to the future. We must constantly, in our role as stewards of the past, be aware of this responsibility. All our efforts should be directed toward achieving the greatest degree of accuracy in our historical and archeological research to

insure the closest correlation between the reality of the past and our explanatory exhibits. These parapets and palisades, cabins and ruins, and restorations and reconstructions are the bridges leading the minds of men to greater appreciation of our heritage. We must not fail in our role as historical engineers shaping the attitudes and understanding of generations yet unborn. For it is only through what we do today in developing our historic sites that the future can know the past through them. If we, in our enthusiasm and in the name of history and restoration, damage, destroy, and distort the clues that have survived rather than competently interpreting them, we have burned the bridges behind us and the future can no longer build on the true evidence, but must forever depend on our interpretation. We, the researchers and developers of historic sites, are the only ones who have the opportunity of observing the maximum amount of historical and archeological evidence. Once the pages in the earth have been revealed through archeology, there is never another chance for those pages to be read, for the archeological process itself is a destructive force, erasing as it reveals. In an excavation there is but one opportunity to recover the data. There is no second chance!

We should guard against first-impulse planning and development, against the log cabin syndrome where the countryside is stripped of log cabins to be planted in a cluster like pseudo-historical mushroom towns springing up overnight, regardless of the historical focus or archeological merit a site might otherwise possess. In our enthusiasm, we may go so far as to use California redwood in our "restorations," implying thereby trade routes and resources undreamed of by our forebears. Yet, the minds of children and unsuspecting adults are shaped by such distortions that are springing as full-blown creations from the forehead of our own age rather than anchored in the past through research and archeology.

Let us guard against the pitfalls of creating "instant history" insufficiently rooted in the rich humus of our heritage of people, their things, and the historic sites that were the stage for their drama. Rather, as we engineer our explanatory exhibits in the form of parapets and palisades, ruins and cabins, and restorations and reconstructions on historic sites, we should be constantly aware of our role as creators of historical images to become burned into the minds of men. If our efforts to interpret history on historic sites are insufficiently documented by research and archeology and we find that the restoration we built must be taken down in favor of a more accurate presentation, the damage has already been done, not only in wasted effort and funds, but also in the false images carried away by all those who viewed the bastard child.

Editor's Note: The preceding article is a shortened version of the paper presented by Mr. South at the Southeastern Museums Conference in Columbia, October 22, 1970.